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## Malesky vs. Fforde: How Best to Analyze Vietnamese Politics?

In 2016, the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* published a review by Adam Fforde of an edited book on Vietnamese politics by Jonathan London.<sup>1</sup> It was quite a critical review. Fforde identified a number of weaknesses with the volume, as well as with individual contributions, including a tendency not to situate arguments within a wider literature, contradictory interpretation of empirics, assuming what needs to be demonstrated, and making assertions without evidence. Towards the end of the review, Fforde bemoans that the volume contributors were allowed to go “their own way.”<sup>2</sup> He continues: “This is unfortunate. They should have been locked in a room and forced to argue it out. There is a need for a decent and likely very noisy argument about how best to analyze Vietnamese politics.”<sup>3</sup> Fforde’s challenge is the stepping off point for this article.

To be fair, some of Fforde’s points should not be cause for alarm. For instance, that Vietnam scholars might interpret data in different ways is not necessarily a problem. Indeed, one might argue that such differences are indicative of a healthy and lively field. However, when we get into the area of tending not to situate arguments within a wider literature—especially if it entails ignoring arguments with which one does not agree—and more important still, assuming what needs to be demonstrated, then we are into

more serious terrain.<sup>4</sup> This article attempts to sort out some of these issues and clarify some of the underlying assumptions Vietnam politics scholars are operating with.

Clearly, this is no small task. Much has been written about Vietnam politics over many years—too much to review in a single article.<sup>5</sup> To make the task manageable, we have elected to focus on just two leading Vietnam scholars: Adam Fforde, since he has laid down the challenge, and another prominent Vietnam scholar, Edmund Malesky. Fforde and Malesky are both highly distinguished and frequently cited scholars.<sup>6</sup> They are also very different in their approaches to studying politics. We are interested in this difference because it allows us to get at the issues that Fforde alludes to in his review of London's *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*.

In this article, we first make some preliminary remarks in relation to the research question we are considering (i.e., how best to analyze Vietnamese politics?). We then look at Malesky's and Fforde's contributions in turn. As we consider the two authors, we are interested not only in how they characterize Vietnamese politics (i.e., what they argue) but also their underlying assumptions. That is, what kind of terminology do they use? What are the conceptual building blocks on which their arguments rest? Which wider scholarly communities do they make connections with? Having compared and contrasted Malesky and Fforde, we then consider how to understand and account for their differences. The article concludes with suggestions for further research. Our article is original in that Fforde and Malesky have never been subject to close scrutiny like this before, let alone together. Moreover, our findings suggest that there are fundamental differences between the two scholars which, we suspect, speak to differences in the Vietnam politics field at large. The differences partly relate to where Fforde and Malesky focus their attention and what they argue, but more importantly they concern divergent perspectives as to what constitutes a meaningful discussion of Vietnamese politics.<sup>7</sup>

Before we turn to our first section, a note on methodology is in order, notably in terms of the process of text selection of the two scholars in question. We have endeavored to cover the full range of Fforde's and Malesky's scholarship on Vietnam; this includes taking account of changes in their arguments and approaches over time. In terms of text selection, we

proceeded in two stages. We first focused on some of their more contemporary work in relation to Vietnam politics research today. We then conducted a further stage of analysis to ensure a more comprehensive review. This included an assessment of Fforde and Malesky's earlier work to check for continuity and change in their analyses, as well as a review of both scholars' most recent writing (i.e., articles or papers that had appeared since our initial research). We have not included an analysis of Fforde's theoretical work on development or Malesky's political science writing that does not relate to Vietnam (although we do draw these texts to the readers' attention in passing). Not all of Fforde's and Malesky's writings are in peer-reviewed journals; we have included such texts where they tell us something important about either their ideas or their approach to analyzing Vietnamese politics (some of Fforde's year-enders in *Asian Studies* are included for this reason). We discuss our methods for analyzing Fforde's and Malesky's in the next section, which lays out our analytical framework.

## How Best to Analyze Vietnamese Politics: What Kind of Question is This?

Fforde's question implies that there are better and worse ways to analyze Vietnamese politics, even a "best" way. This prompts a number of questions: Is this right? If it is right, where does exploring this question lead us? One might say the notion that there is a best way to analyze Vietnamese politics is a strange one. For instance, one could argue that much depends on the specific question being asked, with different questions or research problems requiring different theoretical or methodological approaches.

By way of a starting point, we might say that to pose the question of how best to analyze Vietnamese politics is to pose a question about interpretation. For instance, has the state in Vietnam been developing new techniques of rule in the 2000s, or has it been persisting with older ones? Or, is the Vietnamese state tolerant or repressive? Scholars reasonably have different views on such matters.<sup>8</sup> However, this still does not go to the heart of the question.

To pose this question is also to raise a question about where to look. That is, in order to get a handle on Vietnamese politics, do we think that scholars should be looking at the activities of the Communist Party and/or government (hereafter party-state), or should they be looking elsewhere (e.g. at so-called

civil society organizations)? To talk in this way is to highlight a live issue with respect to Vietnam politics, namely whether or not actors *outside* of party-state structures have become more important in the last, say, twenty years. Clearly, this begs the question “important in what sense?” While this is perhaps a more complex question than it might first appear, we will answer it in a straightforward manner at this stage, simply saying that “important” in this case refers to an ability to influence outcomes. Having said this, we can see that many scholars do indeed believe that actors “outside” of the party-state have become more important in recent years.<sup>9</sup> That this is a prevailing view is reflected in the fact that more scholars are conducting research on “civil society” than was the case previously.<sup>10</sup> However, there is a sense in which even this discussion fails to take us to the heart of the matter when it comes to what the question of how best to analyze Vietnamese politics might be getting at. There is a sense that there are even more fundamental issues at stake.

What is striking about the previous discussion is that it begs so many questions, not least around what is “outside” of party-state structures, and what is “the state.”<sup>11</sup> This takes us into the realm of what we actually think politics is, or questions of ontology. Is politics essentially a debate about who the drivers of change (or upholders of continuity) are? Or is it something else? Having established this, it is then fairly straightforward to explore what different Vietnam scholars have said in relation to these two questions over the years and how they differ, which we will do with reference to Fforde and Malesky.

However, to pose the question of how best to analyze Vietnamese politics also takes us in another direction, namely that of epistemology (i.e., on what grounds we might judge whether any given approach to analyzing politics is superior or inferior, convincing or unconvincing). Fforde’s position seems to imply that we can—and indeed should—make such a judgement. But on what grounds might we do this? We will return to this later.

To sum up the preceding discussion, we can perhaps begin to see that to ask the seemingly innocuous question of how best to analyze Vietnamese politics (or politics anywhere) takes us into challenging terrain. However, once we become alert to the underlying questions of ontology and epistemology, we realize scholars of Vietnam politics hold profoundly different assumptions.

We are interested in Fforde's and Malesky's fundamental assumptions about what politics is, leading us, in turn, to the question of how we might decide between their distinctive approaches. In order to answer the question of how we might decide between their particular approaches, we need to come to a view as to what we think politics actually is (i.e., ontology forms the basis on which we can answer questions about epistemology). This is very different from more positivist approaches to political analysis, which argue that deciding between competing arguments is simply about seeing what argument is supported by what data. We are arguing, by contrast, that adjudicating between different positions has less to do with "weighing the data" and more to do with a series of *a priori* positions or beliefs (ontology) that influences what we see or what we consider "reliable" data in the first place. Moreover, these *a priori* positions are influenced by the relationship of particular branches of political science to dominant power structures: the closer a particular branch of political analysis is to dominant power structures, the less willing its proponents are to question the stability of key concepts. This, we argue, applies to Malesky though not to Fforde. Finally, it is worth noting that the kind of issues we are raising are not unique to Vietnam studies. Rather, they rear their head in political science more generally but—as with Vietnam studies—different parts of the discipline tend to operate in silos and hence we rarely confront difference.<sup>12</sup>

With our analytical framework in place, let us now turn our attention to Malesky's writings on Vietnam.

## Vietnam Politics According to Malesky

Edmund Malesky is Associate Professor of Political Science at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Prior to this, he was at the University of California, San Diego. Malesky cut his teeth as a Vietnam specialist doing doctoral work in the late 1990s and early 2000s by looking at the impact of foreign direct investment on "provincial autonomy" and "reform."<sup>13</sup> More recently, his work has focused on Vietnam's National Assembly or parliament. Malesky's work is often co-authored, most frequently with Paul Schuller but with other scholars as well.<sup>14</sup> Rather unusually for a Vietnam specialist, Malesky is more likely to be published in political science journals than he is in area study journals, and he sometimes writes on wider debates

within political science without reference to Vietnam at all.<sup>15</sup> Apart from writing on the National Assembly, Malesky has done comparative work on China and Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> One other distinctive feature of Malesky's writing is his research methods, specifically a preference for empirical testing using quantitative statistical analysis. His research design is often highly innovative. One of his articles, for instance, utilized a randomized experiment to test the effects of transparency on the behavior of National Assembly delegates along with their chances for re-election.<sup>17</sup>

Earlier, we explained our interest in understanding Malesky's and Fforde's fundamental assumptions about politics before considering how we might choose between their accounts. One way to get at a person's fundamental assumptions about politics is simply to look at what they argue—not as something divorced from their fundamental assumptions but as a clue to them. With this in mind, we now look at the kind of things Malesky says in his writing on the National Assembly. After this, we will examine one of his articles in more detail to flesh out his position more clearly.<sup>18</sup>

Part of what Malesky does in his writing on the National Assembly is to shed light on the kind of institution he thinks it is. A recurring theme in his work is that the National Assembly is to be analyzed as an institution in an “authoritarian” system as distinct from a “democratic” system. Malesky occasionally highlights points of overlap between democratic and authoritarian politics. However, this is only done in passing and never pursued, and he often warns of the dangers of viewing authoritarian and democratic systems as equivalent.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond this, Malesky's research on the National Assembly revolves around three key areas: firstly, the process by which members of parliament, or delegates, are elected, and what the regime seeks to achieve through elections; secondly, whether the National Assembly is representative of voters; and thirdly, whether the National Assembly's influence in politics is growing. The latter is explored with reference to the impact the National Assembly is able to have on legislative policy and, more generally, whether it is able to call the government to account.<sup>20</sup>

On the question of how the electoral process works, Malesky notes that while voters directly elect candidates, the central party-state is more or less able to achieve the election outcome it wants. This is what he means by his

“paint by numbers” approach in which the authorities pre-plan the kind of National Assembly they want ahead of the election.<sup>21</sup> They are able to achieve the outcomes they desire partly through the vetting of candidates but also through a mixture of altering the candidate-to-seat ratio to ensure that favored candidates face an easier contest, and placing preferred candidates alongside weaker ones.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Malesky argues that while there have been efforts to make the process “appear more democratic,” this should be taken with a pinch of salt.<sup>23</sup>

On the question of whether the National Assembly represents voters, Malesky’s answer flows fairly logically from his previous one. Delegates generally do not “reflect the will of the voters,” he writes, adding that delegates who are dependent on the central party and state for nomination to the National Assembly (and future promotion in the party-state) tend not to be critical of the government.<sup>24</sup> He notes that some other groups, such as locally nominated delegates, tend to be more critical as evidenced by the speeches they give and the questions they ask.<sup>25</sup>

On the question of the National Assembly’s influence in politics, Malesky argues that while the National Assembly has grown stronger in recent years, there are limitations to this. For instance, following revisions to the constitution in 1992, laws are now subject to greater scrutiny in the National Assembly than they were before. Delegates, on the whole, are asking tougher questions of the government than they used to, and the Assembly can no longer be guaranteed to wave through nominees to cabinet positions.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, while National Assembly delegates can introduce comments or a petition about legislation, they cannot introduce legislation directly; only high-ranking government officials can do this.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Malesky argues that delegates are always at an information disadvantage compared to the government, and lack experience and capacity.<sup>28</sup> There have been some improvements on this front: delegates are better educated than they used to be, and there are now more university professors, doctors, lawyers, and private business people in the National Assembly than in the past.<sup>29</sup>

While the preceding analysis offers some useful insights into Malesky’s ideas, we need to go into a bit more detail to ensure a solid platform from which to say something about his fundamental assumptions about politics. To do this, we will look at one of his single-authored articles where he



examines Vietnam's escape from what he calls the "partial reform equilibrium" (PRE).<sup>30</sup>

The notion of the PRE comes from scholar Joel Hellman, who argues that "transition economies" pursuing economic reform run the risk of reforms stalling as "winners" from initial reforms can use their "newfound power to block further reform."<sup>31</sup> To escape the partial reform equilibrium, Malesky writes, policymakers need to do two things: first to overcome opposition from the "early winners" and second to unite "a disparate group of potential beneficiaries from future reforms into an alternative coalition."<sup>32</sup> Writing in 2009, Malesky sees the PRE as perfectly describing the situation in Vietnam:

Just as the logic of the PRE would predict, SOEs [state-owned enterprises] used their newfound power to prevail in Hanoi . . . blocking any reform that would hurt their dominant market position . . . Attempts by reform-minded delegates [in the Central Committee] to push new reform policies forward were met with consistent and widely publicized failure.<sup>33</sup>

According to Malesky, this all changed after 2000 as Vietnam overcame the PRE and pursued a "rapid economic reform agenda."<sup>34</sup> This was achieved by a conscious and determined strategy on the part of "reformers" in which they "carefully divided provinces dominated by SOEs . . . to create pairs of new provinces" where one was still dominated by the state sector and the other was a "non-state" province. The non-state provinces "all stood to benefit from reforms that undermined SOE power," Malesky writes, arguing that because non-state provinces were less dependent on SOE revenue, "they were more willing to vote for progress on economic reforms."<sup>35</sup>

According to Malesky, the reformers, whom he identifies as people like Võ Văn Kiệt, Phan Văn Khải, and Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, were seeking to redraw provincial boundaries to achieve a particular end, namely to "empower . . . a specific type of reformist voter."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Malesky is quite specific about what the then Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt was seeking to do, saying "the Prime Minister was aware that he was carving lines around the state sector and determining the province's incentives by the structure of the economy."<sup>37</sup> While the full details of Malesky's hypothesis testing need not concern us, he offers data showing how a redrawing of provincial boundaries

in 1996 did indeed create seven pairs of new provinces, one with a large SOE sector and one without.<sup>38</sup>

The question we are interested in is whether this is a plausible account or not. So, with this in mind, and as a preliminary step, let us now take stock of what we have learned in terms of Malesky's approach to thinking about politics. There are five points.

First, we can see that Malesky's approach involves focusing on a key national political institution, namely the National Assembly. There is nothing wrong with doing this *per se*, but it almost certainly involves assumptions about what it is to study politics. Again, there may be nothing wrong with these assumptions, but we want to be clear about what they are.

Second, Malesky thinks in terms of authoritarian and democratic systems. Based on his way of thinking, Vietnam is clearly in the former camp and, for him, to refer to the country in this way is helpful. Malesky is also not keen to pursue possible points of connection between so-called authoritarian and democratic systems because in his view they are fundamentally different.

Third, there is a big emphasis in Malesky's work on politics as being about policy. He is not blind to ideas of patronage, but an emphasis on politics as being about policy is a recurring theme. We see this in his writing on the National Assembly, where a constant refrain is the extent to which the institution is able to affect the legislative or policymaking process. However, that politics is about policy comes up in other contexts as well (e.g. provincial boundaries were redrawn in 1996 to enable reformers to pursue "radical policies").<sup>39</sup>

Fourth, there is a strong presumption in Malesky's writing regarding intentionality on the part of elites. That is, he has no hesitation in saying that we know that reformers were redrawing provincial boundaries to enable them to pursue reforms. That this is what is happening is clear to him and it is something we can know.

Lastly, much of Malesky's analysis of Vietnamese politics is conducted with a presumption that liberal politics is the yardstick against which Vietnam should be measured. Thus, with reference to the National Assembly, key issues are whether it is representative of voters and whether it is able to hold government to account. These are attributes one would instinctively

refer to with reference to parliaments in liberal political settings. Clearly, Malesky thinks Vietnam falls short with respect to liberal politics, but his discussion is always presented with an eye to whether Vietnam is moving in a liberal direction. What we never get from Malesky is an exploration of how the National Assembly may be better understood with reference to a different set of, say, non-liberal norms. Indeed, there are times when Malesky appears to interpret statements by Vietnamese officials through a liberal lens, statements that could quite easily be understood with reference to non-liberal norms.<sup>40</sup>

We will come back to these points later after considering Fforde's approach to thinking about Vietnamese politics in the following section. We will pursue the same approach as we did with Malesky, namely first identifying some key themes before looking at some of his articles in more detail.

## Vietnam Politics According to Fforde

Adam Fforde is an economist and economic historian who writes a lot about politics. He is professorial fellow at the Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University, Melbourne. Previously, he has held posts at the Australia National University and at the National University of Singapore. His engagement with Vietnam goes back to the late 1970s.<sup>41</sup> Fforde completed a Ph.D. in economics at the University of Cambridge in 1982 on agricultural development in North Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> His first book, co-authored with Suzanne Paine, was published in 1987<sup>43</sup> and he has written widely on the political economy of reform,<sup>44</sup> state industry,<sup>45</sup> development,<sup>46</sup> and politics.<sup>47</sup> His articles have tended to be published in area studies, Communist transition, and economics journals, although he occasionally publishes in political science journals as well.<sup>48</sup> Fforde commonly draws comparisons with the former Soviet Union and China in his work, and he has done comparative work on Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>49</sup> His research methodology is qualitative and he pays quite a bit of attention to discourse, including investigating the precise meaning of Vietnamese political language. His Vietnamese language skills are known to be excellent.

Fforde is best known for his work on the transition from the planned to the market economy.<sup>50</sup> In particular, he popularized the Vietnamese term

translated as “fence-breaking” [*phá rào*] to capture the way in which the emergence of the market economy was primarily driven by spontaneous marketization or “bottom-up” processes whereby farmers or state enterprises took it upon themselves to operate outside of the planned economy. Fforde dates this back to North Vietnam in the 1960s (i.e., well before so-called “reforms” or *Đổi Mới* in 1986). This leads Fforde to emphasize what he calls “endogenous” drivers of change as distinct from “policy,” the importance of which he downplays. Policy is not unimportant for Fforde, but he argues that it is frequently reactive to events rather than determinative of them. Summing up his position, he says that his account seeks to break free from one that privileges the Vietnamese Communist Party as the author of change in favor of a “wide range of diverse independent actors.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, he rather nicely says that Vietnam’s economy was in effect “auto-reformed.”<sup>52</sup>

While there is clearly an interweaving of economics and politics, it is Fforde’s ideas about politics that we are particularly interested in. In 2004 and 2005, Fforde published two articles on Vietnam whose titles contain the phrases “the road to ungovernability” and “popular authority seeking power.”<sup>53</sup> Both titles offer important clues to his thinking about politics. They also point to a position he has held consistently ever since, often against the prevailing wisdom, which has tended to emphasize Vietnam’s stability and success.<sup>54</sup>

For Fforde, the party-state in Vietnam is very weak. While he would argue that this has always been the case, he believes the problems worsened during the mid-1990s and 2000s. More than this, Fforde argues that since the emergence of the market economy, there has been very little rethinking of formal politics, despite the fact that circumstances are now radically changed. Instead, old Leninist or neo-Soviet institutions—and associated thinking—persist, but they are increasingly ill-equipped to address the challenges the country faces. These challenges include the economy’s far greater complexity now that the country has reached middle-income status—including the greater complexity of what is required if prosperity is to be maintained—as well as challenges posed by the emergence of new social classes as the country has developed.<sup>55</sup>

Up until around 1997, there was still enough “residual authority” in the system, Fforde argues, for the party-state to be able to exercise power in the

event of a crisis. However, ten years later even this could not be guaranteed. Moreover, by the mid-2000s, the party-state was “far from the people” and highly corrupt.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, echoing Martin Gainsborough, he argues that the party-state was increasingly just a vehicle for powerful people to pursue their interests, adding that it exhibits no clear developmental rationale for its activities, much less follow-through. As Fforde says, “the higher levels instruct, the lower levels don’t listen” [*trên bảo dưới không nghe*].<sup>57</sup> Assuming his analysis is correct, this is by no measure a healthy state of affairs.

In terms of how we should understand this politically, Fforde’s analysis is particularly insightful. Drawing on work by F.J. Hinsley on sovereignty, Fforde characterizes the problem as a crisis of the “*meaning of political authority*” (italics added).<sup>58</sup> That is, on what grounds does the party-state rule and to what ends, he asks? He argues that if anyone was to ask how to understand the “very nature of the state [in Vietnam]—its ontology,” they would not “receive a satisfactory answer.”<sup>59</sup> To reiterate, as Fforde says—again drawing on Gainsborough—that it is all about “spoils” (i.e., elites feathering their nests) and this is no basis on which to rule. Strikingly, it is not just Fforde who is making these points. Rather, very senior Vietnamese (e.g. academics in government research institutes) are too. He quotes a comment heard at a workshop held in 2010 to discuss Party Congress documents: “We say that the Party holds power—but how does it do this? Whose power does it hold? And who gives that power to the Party?”<sup>60</sup> To hear these questions being asked at senior levels is startling and highly significant.<sup>61</sup>

Against this backdrop of “conservative formal politics,” Fforde notes how events on the ground, not surprisingly, have a momentum of their own. He illustrates this in a whole series of ways, but one way he does so is with reference to village politics. Here, he shows the party-state is neither in control nor has it managed to adapt its thinking to the new situation. He illustrates his argument through a linguistic analysis of the Vietnamese term *cơ sở* (usually translated as “grassroots,” as in grassroots democracy, where many have suggested Vietnam is experimenting with “more democracy” at the grassroots). Fforde finds that *cơ sở* is better understood as referring to the base of the apparatus (i.e., of the party-state). That is, in contrast to the way in

which it is commonly understood by Western analysts, there is no sense in which the base of the apparat is meant to be controlled by the local population (as in popular political control). However, while this is the formal understanding, what Fforde notes is that actual practice in the countryside has moved on with the rise of informal farmers' groups. Such groups are increasingly asserting that "their man," not the party-state's man, gets to lead the village, and, according to Fforde, they are winning the day.<sup>62</sup>

To recap, Fforde's argument is that over the last thirty years, there has been no rethinking of political ideas that could explain how and why the party-state should govern in the entirely changed conditions that now prevail. Old political institutions continue to exist, but there is no clarity as to how they should relate to new groups (e.g. informal farmers' groups, free trade unions, NGOs). Meanwhile, in practice, what we see, and have seen for many years, is a series of tactical retreats by the party-state as it concedes to the new reality. Fforde is not entirely pessimistic about the implications of this situation for the future, but he argues that the gulf between the formal position and how things actually are will, at some stage, have to be resolved, and resolved conclusively.<sup>63</sup>

While we have highlighted clear continuity between Fforde's views on politics first expressed in 2004–2005 and some of his most recent writing (e.g. around 2017–2018), it is worth checking the extent to which Fforde's ideas have evolved (or not evolved) since his early publications in the 1980s. For instance, did Fforde always see things the way he does now, or could we argue that his earlier work brings him closer to Malesky's approach? The simple answer is no. What is striking in reviewing Fforde's early work is the relative consistency of his approach over the years. Of course, there is some refinement of his analysis over the years as one would expect, but one can detect a distinctive Ffordian character even in his earliest work. As early as 1986, Fforde can be seen to be adopting a critical approach to the notion of "policy."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, his ideas about fence-breaking, which clearly go back to his doctoral research, is evident in his work in the early 1990s.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the notion that Fforde ever wrote uncritically about "policy" and hence was formerly closer to Malesky would be a major misreading.<sup>66</sup>

We are now in a position to take stock of Fforde's arguments, particularly to try and tease out what they tell us about his fundamental understanding of

politics. We will then compare his ideas with Malesky's. Both issues are considered in the next section.

### Malesky vs. Fforde: Similarities and Differences?

Beyond the specifics of his analysis, Fforde's thinking about politics can be synthesized with reference to three key points.

First, his is an account that downplays the privileging of policy in understanding change. Moreover, with this comes the idea that the party-state, and those who inhabit it, lack intentionality. That is, it is not easy to identify a coherent, developmental rationale, in terms of state action (i.e., the state acting in specific ways with a view to achieve specific ends, where such things are considered and weighed carefully).<sup>67</sup> To drive home this point, it is worth noting that Fforde believes Vietnam has been lucky in achieving what it has (he attributes this to circumstances coming together in favorable ways). As he says, the economy "auto-reformed." However, the favorable conditions evident in the late 1980s and first half of the 1990s have now dissipated.<sup>68</sup>

Second, Fforde sees the party-state as weak and, perhaps most importantly, lacking in a rationale for rule. He is fond of quoting John Dunn's distinction between the state as "sociological fact" and the state as "normative political proposal."<sup>69</sup> While the architecture of the state clearly exists (i.e., the state as "sociological fact"), for Fforde the state is looking increasingly threadbare as a "normative political proposal." The questions raised about political power by participants at the workshop held to discuss draft Congress documents in 2010, and cited above, are instructive.<sup>70</sup>

Third, while Fforde sees formal politics as suffering from a lack of serious rethinking about how the state might govern, he is clear that the reality on the ground is moving on. This manifests in multiple ways, from powerful business interests "doing their own thing" to the State Bank being unable to impose macroeconomic discipline.<sup>71</sup> However, one of the things he notes, going back to his 2005 article, is "popular authority seeking power." Fforde documents this in respect to informal farmers' groups but it is evident in urban life too.<sup>72</sup>

Let us now compare Fforde with Malesky. Given the analysis so far, we can now see how very different these two authors are both in their approach

to studying politics and their ideas. Malesky places a big emphasis on politics being about policy. Fforde does not. Malesky places a big emphasis on elite intentionality. Fforde does not.

Malesky writes at length about the National Assembly, a formal organ of the party-state. He debates whether it has become stronger as an actor within the Vietnamese political process (e.g. “more teeth” when it comes to amending legislation). Fforde, meanwhile, talks about the profound incoherence of the party-state. For Fforde, the emperor has no clothes. It is no longer able to govern, and people are increasingly at a loss to know what the party-state exists for.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, while Malesky is considering whether the National Assembly has become a more effective law-making body, Fforde talks about situations where “laws passed by the National Assembly” are “profoundly incoherent.” He cites research he conducted on the 2008 Law on Cadres and Public Servants [Luật Cán bộ và Công chức], where he found “no clear understanding at the city level of what these terms usually referred to.” As Fforde says, “the law was empty of meaning.”<sup>74</sup> Such differences between Fforde and Malesky are significant, and it is hard to know how they can both be right.

Furthermore, while Malesky’s analysis tends to be conducted with a liberal presumption about politics, Fforde is at pains to emphasize the way in which, contrary to much Western thinking, there are no such presumptions in formal political thinking (e.g. the lowest level of the party-state is not supposed to be subject to popular political control). To push the point further, from a Ffordian perspective, one might ask why would one scrutinize the workings of the National Assembly. If one wants to understand Vietnamese politics, one needs to look elsewhere and conduct the analysis in a different way.

Lastly, while Malesky operates fairly easily with concepts such as “reform,” “policy,” “the economy,” and “the state,” Fforde is constantly raising questions about them. These terms are not self-evident or stable for Fforde, going right back to his earliest research.<sup>75</sup> For Malesky, they appear to be.

We began this article by taking up Fforde’s call for a “very noisy argument” about how best to analyze Vietnamese politics. We have now laid Fforde alongside Malesky with some quite startling results: as we have seen,



the differences between them are profound. The question we now come to is on what basis we might choose between these rival accounts and also how we might explain their differences.

## How Best to Analyze Vietnamese Politics? Adjudicating between Rival Accounts

Malesky is at his most convincing when he tells us how the central party-state achieves the outcome it wants in National Assembly elections. He also insightfully shows how greater exposure to transparency in Vietnam tends not to have the effect on Vietnamese officials that conventional thinking would expect it to—so much for the pursuit of transparency initiatives by the international aid community. However, Malesky is much less convincing in terms of his broader understanding of the nature of politics. Here, we need Fforde with his emphasis on state weakness and the absence of new thinking by the party-state in terms of how to govern. Indeed, one might say that debates about whether the National Assembly is growing stronger is a distraction from political realities—a bit like how a focus on sparring between Republicans and Democrats in the United States might be viewed as a distraction from how elite power actually works.

There is no silver bullet for knowing who is right and who is wrong when one gets into questions of epistemology. However, considering issues of ontology is crucial. Fforde's probing of the fundamental nature of politics, his ideas about the roots of political power, and his more nuanced approach to causality, point to issues we need to be taking more seriously in Vietnamese political analysis. There is also something about what one can know and what one cannot: Fforde is more circumspect than Malesky here and is more convincing for it. To give an example, Malesky argues that Võ Văn Kiệt sought to outmaneuver his opponents in order to pursue particular kinds of economic policies by redrawing provincial boundaries in a particular way. However, it is far from clear either that this is what happened, or that we can know this with any reliability, or that Malesky's methodological approach helps us know this with any greater certainty.

The next question is how one might explain the differences between Malesky and Fforde—both highly intelligent scholars with impressive credentials. How can they see things so differently?

There may be much that is imponderable here. However, the answer almost certainly lies with the circles they move in. If one is in United States (or the United Kingdom) political science—which is the context in which Malesky publishes his work—certain kinds of conceptual tools and methodologies are expected of you. Moreover, some things cannot be said, and, conversely, certain things “make sense” in that environment but make less sense in a different environment. Fforde moves in different circles than Malesky—again note where Fforde publishes his work.

However, there is a deeper question of why one particular branch of political science does not like to ask the kind of questions that Fforde is fond of. Slavoj Žižek draws on the idea of “the real” (i.e., how things truly are) in invoking the notion of a “traumatic real kernel” that we spend a lot of time trying to avoid because it is too unsettling.<sup>76</sup> We can apply this to our analysis of politics and the political science community in which Malesky sits. To raise fundamental questions about things we usually take for granted—such as “policy,” “the economy,” and “the state”—and to find that things we think are secure are not so secure but rather are simply ideas (“normative political proposals”) is not an avenue everyone wants to go down.

However, there is a wider political point at stake here; it is not just a matter of personal preference. Malesky’s analysis of Vietnam as an “authoritarian regime” that cannot be compared with a “democratic” one is not simply an analytical distinction within comparative politics. Rather, it is a political discourse that upholds a form of global rule, which puts some countries at the top and some at the bottom.<sup>77</sup> Mainstream political science, of which Malesky is a part, is complicit in this form of rule. The irony is that one catches glimpses in Malesky’s account of an awareness that so-called “authoritarian” and “democratic” states can in fact be usefully compared, but the rules of the game according to which he is operating, mean that he does not pursue this.<sup>78</sup> Fforde’s branch of politics is not so constrained. Indeed, he relishes destabilizing these established norms, much to the annoyance of those outside his camp.

## Conclusion

We began this article by taking up Fforde’s challenge for a “decent and likely very noisy argument about how best to analyze Vietnamese politics.” Having

conducted this piece of research, we are clear that there is room for the ideas of both scholars in the field of Vietnam politics. Indeed, it would be profoundly short-sighted and illiberal if we were to try and sideline or dismiss any perspective. However, this is not to say we think that all perspectives are of equal merit. Comparing Fforde with Malesky, we have highlighted some profound differences between their respective approaches, which take us to the heart of what we think politics actually is (i.e., ontology). Being clearer about this is crucial if we are to ever come to sound judgements about epistemology (i.e., adjudicate between rival accounts).

One way to articulate this is to ask ourselves whether it is meaningful and/or helpful to debate whether Vietnam's National Assembly is becoming a more effective law-making body or whether we think this is a distraction from politics as it really is. It is not that there is no debate to be had about the changing position of the National Assembly (or any other Leninist institution) in Vietnamese political life. However, it does not go to the heart of the matter, which has more to do with there being a crisis in the meaning of political authority in Vietnam, an absence in new thinking and practice about how to rule in changed circumstances, and an inability to answer fundamental questions about what the party-state is there to do and where its authority comes from. Meanwhile, against this backdrop, practice (i.e., "what actually happens") is running away with itself, and, ultimately, this is not sustainable. These are the areas on which future research should focus. It does not matter particularly where scholars look to do their research ("inside" the party-state, "outside" of it)—all areas are potentially fruitful—but scholars need to focus on these issues if we are to get at the cutting edge of where Vietnamese politics is at today.

Lastly, there is a need for greater honesty regarding the fact that there are profoundly different approaches to analyzing Vietnam politics operating in the field. Scholarship is not served by us operating in silos or simply ignoring our differences. We need to discuss our differences, and that includes scholars of the calibre of Malesky and Fforde. Let us be clear about the underlying assumptions we are working with. Let us be willing to defend our particular approaches, but let us also be open to refining them in light of debate, working across the usual divides to produce cutting-edge research. Getting this right is not simply of academic interest—it concerns the future of ninety-five million people.

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#### ABSTRACT

*The article explores different ways of thinking about Vietnamese politics through an examination of the writing of Adam Fforde and Edmund Malesky. It argues that in order to adjudicate between different approaches to analysing Vietnamese politics, we need to come to a view about what we think politics actually is (i.e., ontology forms the basis on which we can answer questions about epistemology). This is very different from more positivist approaches to political analysis which argue that deciding between competing arguments is about weighing the data. I argue, by contrast, that adjudicating between rival positions has more to do with a series of a priori positions or beliefs that influence what we consider reliable data in the first place.*

KEYWORDS: *Vietnam, Politics, Communist Party, Adam Fforde, Edmund Malesky*

#### Notes

1. Jonathan D. London, ed. *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam: Party, State, and Authority Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). For Fforde's review, see "Book Reviews," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, nos. 3–4 (2016): 365–372.
2. Fforde, "Book Reviews," 372.
3. Ibid.
4. Fforde raises similar concerns in a review of Thomas Jandl, *Vietnam in the Global Economy: The Dynamics of Integration, Decentralization, and Contested Politics* (Lexington Books, 2015). See Adam Fforde, "Book Review," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2014): 176–179.
5. For a selection of landmark texts, see Borje Ljunggren, ed., *The Challenge of Reform in Indochina* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International

- Development, 1993); Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Carlyle Thayer, "Mono-Organisational Socialism and the State," in *Vietnam's Rural Transformation*, edited by Benedict Kerkvliet and Doug Porter (Singapore: ISEAS, 1995), 39–64; Adam Fforde and Stefan de Vylder, *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Dang Phong and Melanie Beresford, *Authority Relations and Economic Decision-Making in Vietnam: An Historical Perspective* (Copenhagen, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1998); Anita Chan, Benedict Kerkvliet, and Jonathan Unger, eds., *Transforming Asian Socialism: China and Vietnam Compared* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); Martin Gainsborough, *Changing Political Economy of Vietnam: The Case of Ho Chi Minh City* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Benedict Kerkvliet and David Marr, eds., *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government in Vietnam* (Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2004); Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Martin Gainsborough, *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (London: Zed Books, 2010); Hue-Tam Tai and Mark Sidel, eds., *State, Society and the Market in Contemporary Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 2013); Jorg Wischermann, Bui The Cuong, and Dang Thi Viet, "Vietnamese Civic Organisations: Supporters of or Obstacles to Further Democratisation? Results from an Empirical Survey," *Journal of Current Southeast Asia* 2 (2016): 57–88; and Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
6. According to Google Scholar, Fforde has 2,130 citations against Malesky's 1,899. However, Fforde has been publishing in the field for longer than Malesky. On citations per year, which controls for how long a scholar has been publishing, Malesky performs better than Fforde with 95 citations per year compared with Fforde's 50 citations per year. By way of comparison but also to establish the prominence of Fforde and Malesky in the Vietnam politics field, note that Carlyle Thayer has 2,534 citations but only 35 citations per year and Martin Gainsborough has 880 citations and 34 citations per year. Benedict Kerkvliet has 1,437 citations, excluding his work on the Philippines, or 29 citations per year.
  7. We are not claiming that Fforde and Malesky speak to *all* differences in the Vietnam politics field. However, we do assert that they speak to some differences; one only has to look at Fforde's reviews of London and Jandl's books. What Fforde and Malesky argue connects them to other scholars operating in the field (e.g. Fforde connects with Gainsborough; Malesky connects with Jandl, and so on). See Fforde, "Book Reviews," 368–371 and Fforde, "Book Review," 176–179.

- See also Martin Gainsborough, "The Myth of the Centralised Socialist State in Vietnam: What Kind of Myth?" *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2017): 119–143 for an article that further teases out some of the key fault lines in the analysis of Vietnam politics.
8. Fforde points this out in his review of London. See Fforde, "Book Reviews," 368–371.
  9. See Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics*, 35–36, for a key statement of this position, referred to by Kerkvliet as the dialogical approach. Other scholars who follow in the footsteps of this dialogical approach to analyzing Vietnamese politics include David Koh, "Urban Government: Ward-level Administration in Hanoi," in Kerkvliet and Marr, eds., *Beyond Hanoi*, 197–228; and Thomas Sikor, "Local Government in the Exercise of State Power: The Politics of Land Allocation in Black Thai Villages," in *Beyond Hanoi*, 167–198. Andrew Wells-Dang, who also sees himself as building on Kerkvliet's approach, says specifically that actors "outside" the party-state have become more important in recent years. See Andrew Wells-Dang, "The Political Influence of Civil Society in Vietnam," in *Politics of Contemporary Vietnam*, 180.
  10. See, for example, Benedict Kerkvliet, Russell Heng, and David Koh, eds., *Getting Organized in Vietnam: Moving in and Around the Socialist State* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003); Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 1 (2009): 1–27; Joerg Wischermann, "Governance and Civil Society Action in Vietnam: Changing the Rules from Within," *Asian Politics and Society* 3, no. 3 (2011): 383–411; Andrew Wells-Dang, *Civil Society Networks in China and Vietnam: Informal Pathbreakers in Health and the Environment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Tran Ngoc Angie, *Ties that Bind: Cultural Identity, Class and Law in Vietnam's Labor Resistance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2013); and Benedict Kerkvliet, "Regime Critics: Democratization Advocates in Vietnam, 1990s–2014," *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2015): 359–387.
  11. See Gainsborough, *Vietnam* for an extended exploration of this.
  12. I am grateful for the comments of an anonymous reviewer for helping me articulate this argument more clearly.
  13. See Edmund J. Malesky, "At Provincial Gates: The Impact of Locally Concentrated Foreign Direct Investment on Provincial Autonomy and Local Reform," (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 2004); and "Push, Pull, and Reinforcing: The Channels of FDI Influence on Provincial Governance in Vietnam," in *Beyond Hanoi*, edited by Kerkvliet and Marr, 285–326.
  14. With Schuler, see Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, "Paint-by-Numbers Democracy: The Stakes, Structure, Results and Implications of the 2007

- Vietnamese National Assembly Election,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 1048; “Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament,” *The American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 1–21; and “The Single-Party Dictator’s Dilemma: Information in Elections without Opposition,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2011): 491–530. With others, including Schuler, see Edmund Malesky, Paul Schuler, and Anh Tran, “The Adverse Effects of Sunshine: A Field Experiment on Legislative Transparency in an Authoritarian Assembly,” *The American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012): 762–786.
15. See, for instance, Scott Gehlbach and Edmund J. Malesky, “The Contribution of Veto Players to Economic Reform,” *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 4 (2010): 957–975; and Nathan M. Jensen, Edmund Malesky, and Stephen Weymouth, “Unbundling the Relationship between Authoritarian Legislatures and Political Risk,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44 (2013): 655–684.
  16. See Edmund Malesky, Regina Abrami, and Yu Zheng, “Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and China,” *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 4 (2011), 401–419; and Edmund Malesky and Jonathan London, “The Political Economy of Development in China and Vietnam,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 395–419.
  17. See Malesky, Schuler, and Tran, “The Adverse Effects of Sunshine.” Specifically, the experiment involved creating individual websites for randomly selected delegates to inform citizens about these delegates’ legislative activities.
  18. Though many of Malesky’s articles are co-authored, we will from this point on simply refer to Malesky in the text for reasons of concision.
  19. For specific examples, see “Paint-by-Numbers Democracy,” 10; “Nodding or Needling,” 485–486; “The Single-Party Dictator’s Dilemma,” 525; and “The Adverse Effects of Sunshine Sunshine,” 771 and 784. For points of connection, see “The Single-Party Dictator’s Dilemma,” 525.
  20. For occasions when Malesky makes connections between the National Assembly and policy or policymaking, see “Paint-by-Numbers Democracy,” 6, 7, 14; “Nodding or Needling,” 485, 489, 494; “The Single-Party Dictator’s Dilemma,” 494, 517; and “The Adverse Effects of Sunshine Sunshine,” 763 and 765.
  21. “Paint-by-Numbers Democracy.”
  22. “Paint-by-Numbers Democracy” and “The Single-Party Dictator’s Dilemma.” See also Martin Gainsborough, “Party Control: Electoral Campaigning in Vietnam in the Run-up to the May 2002 National Assembly Elections,” *Pacific Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2005): 57–76.
  23. “Paint-by-Numbers Democracy,” 3 and 34.
  24. “Paint-by-Numbers Democracy,” 3; “Nodding or Needling.”
  25. “Nodding or Needling,” 494.

26. "Paint-by-Numbers Democracy," 6–8. "Nodding or Needling," 487–488.
27. "Paint-by-Numbers Democracy," 7.
28. Ibid, 8–9.
29. "Nodding or Needling," 486–487.
30. Edmund Malesky, "Gerrymandering—Vietnamese Style: Escaping the Partial Reform Equilibrium in a Non-Democratic Regime," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 132–159. While this is one of Malesky's earlier pieces, we have checked that it is broadly representative of his later work. Later articles possibly use the language of "reformer" and "conservative" somewhat less, with terms such as "authoritarian," "VCP officials," and "dictator" being more common, but the fundamentals in terms of how he understands politics have not changed. See for example "Nodding or Needling," 486; "The Single-Party Dictator's Dilemma," 500–503; and "The Adverse Effects of Sunshine," 763.
31. Joel Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Post-Communist Transitions," *World Politics* 50, no. 2, 203–234.
32. "Gerrymandering—Vietnamese Style," 132.
33. Ibid, 133.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid, 134. In terms of the evidence, it is hypotheses 3 and 4 in his model.
36. Ibid, 140–141.
37. Ibid, 142.
38. Ibid, 139.
39. Ibid.
40. See, for instance, the words of Bui Ngoc Thanh in "The Single-Party Dictator's Dilemma," 502. Thanh, who speaks for the secretariat of the Central Election Board, is talking about the candidate-to-seat ratio in National Assembly elections. However, it is far from clear that Thanh is lamenting a lack of liberal proclivities in the National Assembly.
41. Fforde was in Hanoi in 1978–1979 around the time of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, making him one of the few Westerners in the country at this time.
42. This was later published as Adam Fforde, *The Agrarian Question in North Vietnam, 1974–1979: A Study of Cooperator Resistance to State Policy* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharp, 1989).
43. Adam Fforde and Suzanne Paine, *The Limits of National Liberation* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).
44. Fforde and de Vylder, *From Plan to Market*. For an updated analysis, see also Adam Fforde, "Vietnam: Economic Strategy and Economic Reality," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 2 (2016): 3–20.



45. Adam Fforde, "The Historical Background to Vietnam's Contemporary State Enterprise Story," Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong (Working Paper no. 150, October 2014); Adam Fforde, *Vietnamese State Industry and the Political Economy of Commercial Renaissance: Dragon's Tooth or Curate's Egg* (Oxford: Chandos, 2007).
46. Adam Fforde, *Reinventing 'Development': The Sceptical Change Agent* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan 2017); Adam Fforde, *Understanding Development Economics: Its Challenge to Development Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013); and Adam Fforde, *Coping with Facts: A Skeptic's Guide to the Problem of Development* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2009).
47. See the many references to Fforde's work on politics below.
48. Adam Fforde, "Post-Cold War Vietnam: Stay Low, Learn, Adapt and Try to Have Fun – But What About the Party?," *Contemporary Politics* 19, no. 4 (2013), 1–20.
49. See, for instance, Adam Fforde, "Policy Ethnography and Conservative Transition from Plan to Market: The construction of Policy Rationalities and the 'Intellectual Limitations' of Leading Comrades," *International Journal of Social Economics* 36, no. 6 (2009): 659–678; and also Adam Fforde, "The Politics of Civil Society Organisation in Cambodia and Vietnam," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 12 (2013): 35–53.
50. See especially Adam Fforde, "The Political Economy of 'Reform' in Vietnam — Some Reflections," in Ljunggren, ed., *The Challenge of Reform*, 293–326; Fforde and de Vylder, *From Plan to Market*; and Adam Fforde, "From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam and China Compared," in Anita Chan, Benedict Kerkvliet and Jonathan Unger, eds., *Transforming Asian Socialism: China and Vietnam Compared* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 43–72.
51. Adam Fforde, "Economics, History, and the Origins of Vietnam's Post-War Economic Success," *Asian Survey* 49, no. 3 (2009): 484.
52. "Policy Ethnography," 674. Fforde eschews the notion of "correct" policy, preferring instead the question of whether it works, where "it" might be policy-related but may be more spontaneous.
53. Adam Fforde, "Vietnam in 2003: The Road to Ungovernability?," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 1, (2004): 121–129; and Adam Fforde, "Vietnam in 2004: Popular Authority Seeking Power," *Asian Survey* 45, no. 1 (2005): 146–152.
54. For the most up-to-date articulation of his position, consistent with his ideas expressed in 2004–2005, see Adam Fforde, "The Emerging Core Characteristics of Vietnam's Political Economy," *Asian-Pacific Economic Literature* 31, no. 2 (2017): 45–60; and Adam Fforde and Lada Homutova, "Political Authority in Vietnam: Is the Vietnamese Communist Party a Paper Leviathan?" *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36, no.3 (2017): 91–118.

55. Adam Fforde, "Contemporary Vietnam: Political Opportunities, Conservative Formal Politics, and Patterns of Radical Change," *Asian Politics and Policy* 3, no. 2 (2011): 166; Adam Fforde, "Luck, Policy or Something Else Entirely? Vietnam's Economic Performance in 2009 and Prospects for 2010," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2009): 74.
56. Fforde, "Contemporary Vietnam," and Fforde, "Luck, Policy, or Something Else Entirely?"
57. See "Luck, Policy or Something Else Entirely?" and "Post-Cold War Vietnam." See also Martin Gainsborough, "From Patronage to 'Outcomes': Vietnam's Communist Congresses Reconsidered," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 1 (2007): 3–26, on which Fforde draws.
58. "Contemporary Vietnam," 167–168
59. Ibid, 168.
60. "Post-Cold War Vietnam," 19.
61. These ideas are further explored in Fforde's most recent writing; See Fforde, "The Emerging Core Characteristics" and Fforde and Homutova, "Political Authority."
62. "Contemporary Vietnam." See also Adam Fforde, "Vietnam's Informal Farmers' Groups: Narratives and Policy Implications," *Sudostasien aktuell* 1 (2008), 3–36.
63. Ibid, 180–181.
64. See Adam Fforde, "The Unimplementability of Policy and the Notion of Law in Vietnamese Communist Thought," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 14, no. 1 (1986): 60–70.
65. Fforde, "The Political Economy of 'Reform' in Vietnam." See also Fforde, *The Agrarian Question*.
66. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify this point.
67. This is to draw a contrast between Vietnam and Asian developmental states. For a concise roundup on the latter, see Adrian Leftwich, "Bring Politics Back In: Towards a Model of the Developmental State," *Journal of Development Studies* 31, no. 3 (1995): 400–427.
68. "Luck, Policy or Something Else Entirely?"; "The Emerging Core Characteristics"; and Fforde and Homutova, "Political Authority."
69. "Luck, Policy or Something Else Entirely?," 72.
70. "Economics, History," 484.
71. "Luck, Policy or Something Else Entirely?"
72. On the urban scene, see Wells-Dang, "The Political Influence of Civil Society in Vietnam."
73. Fforde makes a distinction between governing and arresting dissidents in "Economics, History," 484.
74. "Contemporary Vietnam," 179 and 182.
75. "The Unimplementability of Policy."

76. Cited in Ole Bjerg, *The Parallax of Growth: The Philosophy of Ecology and Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 25–27.
77. For scholarship that makes analogous arguments, see Julian Eckl and Ralph Weber, “North-South? Pitfalls of Dividing the World by Words,” *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2007): 3–27; Charles T. Call, “The Fallacy of the Failed State,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, 8 (2008): 1491–1607; Branwen Gruffydd, “The Global Political Economy of Social Crisis: Towards a Critique of the ‘Failed State’ Ideology,” *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 8 (2008): 180–205; and Martin Gainsborough, “Liberal Interventionism and the Global North: The Case of Britain’s Inner Cities” (SPAIS Working Paper, no. 11–11, 2011).
78. See note 19 above for the references that illustrate this.